

James Bradley was born in Adelaide, South Australia, where he completed a degree in law and took honours in philosophy. He has worked as a law clerk, judges' associate, solicitor, research assistant and editor. He has written a book of poetry - *Paper Nautilus* - which was short listed for the 1995 National Book Council Banjo Awards - and edited *Blur*, an anthology of writing by young Australian writers. His first novel *Wrack*, won the 1998 FAW Literature Award and the Kathleen Mitchell Literary Award, and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. His second novel - *The Deep Field* - received major critical acclaim and won the prestigious *The Age* Fiction Book of The Year in 1999. He currently lives in Sydney.

When a writer succeeds spectacularly with a first novel, there is often the weight of the world on his or her shoulders to do so, yet again, with the next. Are they up to the task critics scorn; will the book have the same or greater appeal with readers publishers ponder; and will the author go on to build a solid career as a writer their agents muse? Although such weight often serves to stifle, perhaps even crush, a talented young author, not so James Bradley.

While Bradley's first publication - a book of poetry entitled *Paper Nautilus* - received critical attention in the form of short listing for the 1995 National Book Council Banjo Awards, it was his first two novels, *Wrack* and *The Deep Field*, that rapidly cemented his reputation as an emerging literary talent.

Set against the background of the search for the wreck of a Portuguese ship in the sandhills of the southern coast of new South Wales, and invoking the enigmatic tale of Java la Grand and its charting by French mapmakers in the sixteen century, *Wrack*, provided a dazzling debut as a first novel winning the 1998 FAW Literature Award and the Kathleen Mitchell Literary Award, as well as receiving short listings for the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book (SE Asia and Pacific Region).

Far from resting on his laurels, Bradley's second book, *The Deep Field*, served to further confirm his reputation as a fine emerging writer with a broad range of creative tools in his armory. Set in the early post-apocalyptic years of the 21st century in a world "gleaming with technological brilliance and shadowed by urban decay," *The Deep Field* is an intricately structured meditation on a number of haunting themes including love, time, memory and loss. According to Bradley, a number of motivations lay behind *The Deep Field*: "I wanted to get at the idea that there are patters of order in the world that we inhabit...I also wanted to make sense of the notion of ending and loss as well..."

In terms of his philosophy on style in the novel, Bradley is a firm believer in the notion of leaving the reader with something to contemplate beyond the material scope of the final page, "The books that I really admire are the ones that don't end on the last past" he suggests. Consequently, he believes that one of the aims of the novel is that it should "provoke" or "unsettle the reader" rather than render them passive or indifferent towards the work. In his forthcoming book, however, Bradley has made a conscious decision to whittle down some of the "machinery" or mechanics that he says he used in

his early works; aiming at a more “paired down” approach. While he won’t exactly let on what it’s about, Bradley suggests that it’s a “difficult book to write...it’s not about nice stuff and [it] ends up going to some rather horrible places.”

While the research behind his first two novels appears rather ominous in scope, Bradley also uses the craft of research as a starting point for the skillful blending of fact, fiction and speculation. Accordingly, Bradley’s research is harnessed in clever ways that go towards fleshing out his story, as well as in the provision of embellishments such as aphorisms and quotations from historical sources. Indeed, *Wrack* itself was a book that Bradley suggests is given over to considering what he calls the “slipperiness of history” as one of its underlying themes.

Like many authors, James Bradley’s quest to become a writer also came as a consequence of leaving behind another career path. Originally trained as a lawyer and having worked as a solicitor and judge’s associate, Bradley’s commitment to his writing eventually lead him to make a choice between his pursuit of a career as a lawyer, or forging ahead as an emerging author, “I was working as a solicitor and they and I [both] realized that I had to do one or the other... I was always reasonably clear about what I wanted to do...” And so Bradley’s choice has lead him on a path towards two successful novels and an eagerly awaited third.

While James Bradley is most appreciative of his recognition thus far, he remains decidedly understated about his achievements in earning a number of prestigious accolades as an emerging writer. Far from allowing his success to overtake him, Bradley believes that while such recognition is a “...wonderful thing...” winning awards is more about recognition of the work rather than “...the need of external response or adulation.”

Certainly the critics weren’t backward in coming forward about his Bradley’s work. Indeed, his initial success was girded by positive reviews from critics such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s chief book reviewer Andrew Riemer who praised Bradley’s first book in glowing terms: “...*Wrack* is a rare thing: the product of an individual imagination that manages to fashion something fresh and fine out of familiar, even perhaps cliché’d material.”

So what insights does James Bradley have to offer about the writing process and the discipline of writing? While ultimately Bradley believes that “...writing is difficult for everybody...” he further suggests that writers should, above all, learn to “...trust their instincts as well as...listen to other people.” Also, in common with other writers - such as Robert Dassaix - Bradley believes that the process of writing has a strong element of ‘self-discovery’ attached to it in the context of working out (or perhaps working through) ideas, feelings and/or responses to issues. As Bradley reflects: “[I write because]...there is something that you don’t know how to get your head around and you need to work it out....”

What advice does James Bradley have for writers starting out? No doubt his two most important pieces of advice are first to remember that “...writing is a process that is

frustrating and lonely and its important not to lose sight of what you are trying to do” and secondly, to read, “Reading comes prior for me than writing... I’m a reader before I’m a writer... I don’t understand how you can be a writer without reading...”

Finally, while he’s not giving away much at all, Bradley is quietly working way behind the scenes on his next novel. No doubt if the success of his first two are any indication, James Bradley is a name that we are going to become used to hearing mentioned alongside some of Australia’s finest writing talent.

Interview and Story by Marcus Niski, Copyright 2002.

This interview originally appeared in The Australian Writer # 330